



Queering Protest Sites



This is a collection of writing by women, queer, and trans people that have at some point lived on protest sites.

I'm sure I speak for all of us when I say that those years were some of the best of our lives, nothing quite compares to the times we spent together, fighting so hard for what we believed in and building life-long friendships.

Despite this, we cannot deny that some of the people we lived with oppressed us on a daily basis.

We wrote this zine as a space to air some of our frustrations and desires after years of living in communities where we felt our sexualities and genders were often dismissed and made to feel inferior.

A warning; this zine mentions homophobia, transphobia, sexism, rape and contains some soft porn.

I fucking miss it. I miss it like the one that got away. Every autumn, when that first clear cold breeze hits my skin the memories flood back and the hole where those treehouses used to be feels big enough to rip me apart. We know that queer community and fighting the destruction of the land we call home should be one and the same and it's heart-breaking/enraging when it feels like a battle in itself just to bring them together. They are one and the same because life and land are the same as life and love. Because we fight the degradation of our complex, diverse bodies, identities, passions with the same rage that we fight the degradation of complex, diverse, living ecosystems, ecologies, geologies.

The worlds of sites and queers are both spaces where activism and our relationships sometimes feel too close for comfort, but it's that closeness that keeps them strong and vital. Just like so many stories of battle, in the most important moments we're fighting for those alongside us just as much as anything else. It's the love of what we're fighting for that keeps us strong enough to fight. It is rarely that simple though. When different people come to fight with us we have to be prepared to face conflict either side of us, as well as in front. And even before that we have to wade through the fog of difference to find the line between a difference that will make us stronger, and a difference that we have to defend ourselves against.

I want you to know how much fun we had. I want you to know the success story, the romance novel, the sleazy tree porn. I want you to know how many battles we won. I want you to know these stories because I don't think we can fight against anything if we're not completely in love with what we're fighting for. I know I can't.



How Men Can Make the Activist Scene 8 Million Times Less Sexist, and Safe for Women

The fire reflected off of the faces of those who had made this campaign a success. These woods surrounding us were supposed to have been chopped down eight years ago, and because of us, they were still here. Eight more mating seasons for the birds and squirrels and rabbits. Eight more years of great oaks and yielding willows filtering our air. At that moment, I loved these guys, every single one.

So when the conversation turned to the lack of women on site I was pulled out of hippie-world and splashed face-first into the stream of gendered reality. I piped up "Well, I wouldn't stay here if I were the only woman, either."

The men turned to me in shock. Was I the same sister who had distracted the police while they assumed positions in their defences? The same woman who had schlepped wheelbarrows of dirt and concrete to secret locations under cover of the new moon? The same woman who told jokes even when food sources dwindled and we were surrounded by police, facing a reality that felt hopelessly grim? Were these not acts of love? Would I not love them if there hadn't been another woman on site? How could I not trust my affinity group? They weren't going to rape me, and were insulted I would insinuate as much.

I am for all intents and purposes, a woman. I was born female, and I look like a conventional woman and have lived my life as one. And for many years of this life I lived on sites of protest and action in the UK and in the US.

Often that meant that I went away into the woods with a group of men. Some I knew or heard of, and some I called, and still call, friends. The rest were usually strangers who said they cared about the environment as

much as I did. Many of these male activists lived off the grid with no fixed abode, no local ties, and no record of existence beyond a birth certificate or criminal record. For security reasons (for the action, not for myself), no one outside of the woods knew exactly where I was, or how to reach me quickly. Often actions were in rural or remote places, so phone reception was spotty at best, and my phone could only be charged with electricity not readily available in the woods. I slept in communal areas with these men, or in my own tent or treehouse that was easily accessible to anyone in the area.

Sometimes I was fucking one of these men, but often I was not. That makes a huge difference, but more on that later.

I was always aware that should one or more of these men try to attack me, the only things that could save me were my own strength, or the help of the other men there. I realized that I was handing over the safety of my body and my self-determination to others.

This situation sounds insane, and few who have been raised as women or who lived as women would consider this a safe situation. Yet hundreds, or maybe thousands, or maybe tens of thousands of us female activists have placed ourselves in situations like this in order to work on an action. It feels impossible to explain exactly why this is such a scary prospect to the men who are my friends; the men I've depended on for safety.

If you identify as a woman and are reading this, you're nodding your head. You don't need to be told any of this because you have either lived this story (or a version of it), or you can imagine it well. If you are a man, you're probably ready to put this down. You think I'm a man-basher. You think I'm going to call you a rapist. You're upset because many times you've protected the only woman on site from unwelcome advances that weaken the action. You're one of the good guys, and I should see that, damn it!

I do see that. Many times one of my friends, or even one of the strangers, has sensed my discomfort or panic and stepped in to reinforce my emphatic "NO!" To them I will be forever grateful, for they understand that actions can't be successful if the women can't trust the activists with who they are working. I love and appreciate all of my lovely men who were concerned with my feelings and helped me to off-site the creeps.

But many times I was also alone. Those times when I brought up the problem of lecherous or aggressive or macho men on site who made me feel unsafe, the men were mystified. "Oh that? That was just a little bit of flirting."

In my world being held down against my will is not flirting, no matter how much the guy holding me down is laughing. Why was no one checking to see if I was laughing?

I've also been told that some of the threatening men couldn't be offset because they were too important to the action. Maybe they were brilliant organizers. Or they had a vehicle we could use. Or they were the best climbers/builders. But that's not what I heard. What I heard was that they were more important than me; that if I had a problem, I had to be the one to leave site.

A few times my pleas have even been thrown back into my face as accusations. "You want us to get rid of this guy because you don't trust us to keep you safe from him." Well... should I have to? Should I have to exist in the same space as a potential rapist and then trust that someone from site is keeping an eye on him 24/7? Even when there's drinking or drug-use going on? Because that doesn't sound safe in my book.

And neither do these two realities:

1. Overall I've found a willingness both by men, and by the other women who are sometimes on site as well, to tolerate dangerous or threatening behaviour by men towards women.
2. Sometimes a woman is safer on site if she's fucking one of the men.

When I fucked my first (awesome, feminist) man on site, I was amazed at how all the sexual harassment from the guys on site just went away. I was treated like one of the guys and could help with the action

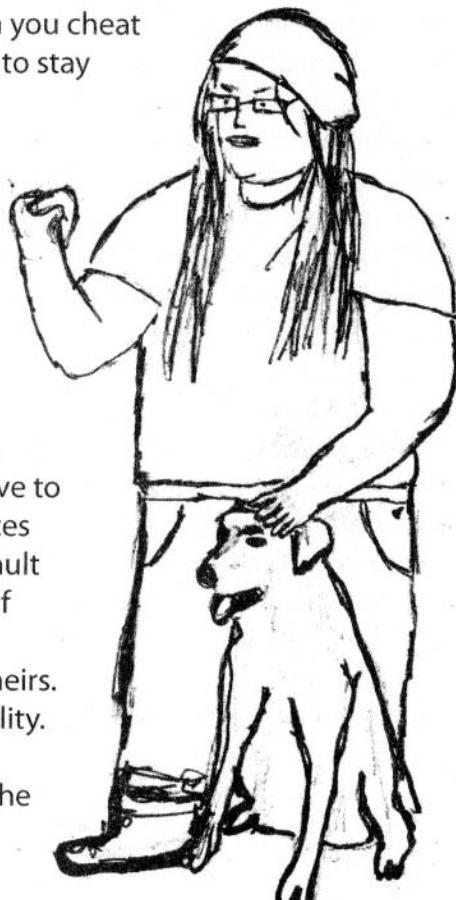
unhindered by creepy advances or uncomfortable stares and words. Women who are attached to partners tend to be left alone. It's like the other men tacitly agree that she's been claimed and therefore accept her as an extension of her male partner and do not fight for her attention.

So I guess this gives women an incentive to partner-up (heterosexually, that is - lesbian relationships on site are a whole other enraging article) as soon as they get onto site. But how problematic is that? If you aren't partnered up, many of the men on site feel that at least one of them is entitled to be your partner. They behave as if it is a competition and are angry when you cheat them out of the prize by choosing to stay single.

You then often lose the other hetero-partnered women as your allies when you do this. Some part of them blames you for not securing yourself by attaching yourself to a man the way they did. It's like they feel on some unconscious level that since they had to put out you should have to as well, and that the sexual advances from the single guys is your own fault because you didn't protect yourself by partnering-up, and therefore it becomes your problem, and not theirs. It becomes a total caveman mentality.

And this mentality needs to die if the activist scene is to stay alive.

In general, if I want to fuck a man on site, I'll let him know. And if for some reason I'm too shy to let him know, he can ask. I am a verbal beings- ask me if you



ever have doubt. And pay attention to our signals. Straight men: if you are encroaching on my personal space and I'm smiling and leaning into you or finding excuses to touch you, I'm interested in perhaps just maybe fucking you. (I may just be interested in laughing and flirting and cuddling with you. It's the risk you take, guys). If I lean away or find an excuse to get up and change seats, or if you find it exceedingly hard to catch me alone, or if I go out of my way to avoid your touches, it means NO. It means I am not interested in a physical connection with you at all, and won't be later. Your pushing of the issue puts me into an awkward position, and may make me feel unsafe. It's just like in the outside world. No different. Until every individual man gets that, women on sites aren't safe. Even if you are an honourable feminist man who gets it, if you allow someone who isn't and doesn't to remain on a site where women are or could potentially be, you are complicit in what happens.

So men: ally up! Help us create the model society in our own activist communities while we try to create it for the world. Pay attention to our signals and our words. Ask us if you aren't certain. Ask us if we feel safe. Correct other men who say sexist or violent shit, even when drunk or high. Enforce a zero-tolerance policy toward men, no matter how useful or talented, who are aggressive in any way (verbally, physically, sexually) toward women.

And do all this even if a woman isn't rewarding you with sex.

- Avery Oslo

forest queers forever.

When I was 16 I moved to a protest site and lived in a tree for the best part of 7 years. I moved around, campaigning against all sorts; roads, supermarkets, housing developments, gas pipe lines, aluminium smelters and open cast coal mines.

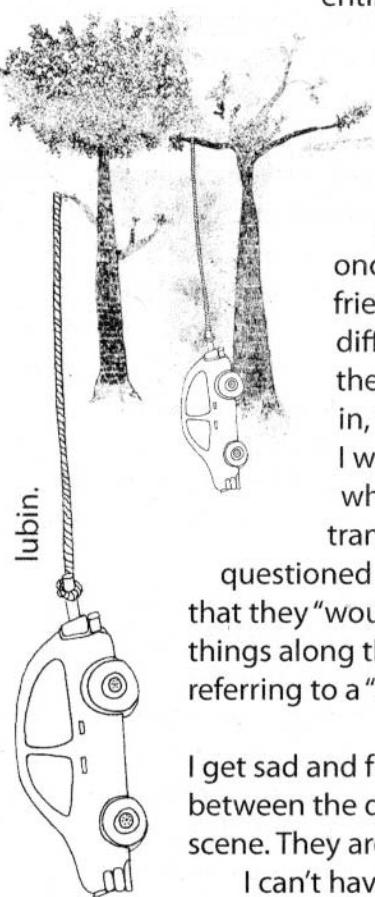
They were the best years of my life, living outside in the woods, as part of a community that soon became my family. I learnt more than I ever did at school. I quickly became an experienced climber and learnt how to build treehouses. I learnt about my surroundings, the names of the different kinds of trees and that a lot of the things that grew on the ground were also food. I learnt how to defend the land against the eviction team and the corporations that wanted to cut down the trees. We dug tunnels under the ground and built chambers there too, filling them with dried food so we could last down there as long as possible.

I strongly feel that you have to live in nature to realise how integral it is to our existence. We need trees to breathe; it's as simple as that. But if you live in the city all your life, you are so removed from what is real that you forget what it is that is keeping you alive.

When I first became a part of the protest site scene it was somewhat dominated by macho cisgender men. I was still young and hadn't started to transition. The gender balance wasn't good and when there were few women around we mostly had to keep quiet and deal with the sexism. Over the years things have gotten better, there are more queers on site, battling against the inherent heteronormality of the space and speaking out against the casual homophobia that we experienced on a daily basis. For a while a few of us were organising

queer parties in the city and this really helped with people becoming more open to queer sexualities, non binary genders and understanding our struggles. In more recent years protest sites have started to develop safer spaces agreements which help to some degree, though sites are still dominated by white, cisgender straight people.

When I started to transition I moved to the city. People on site were understanding and accepting of my name and pronoun change but still got it wrong A LOT. I realise that everyone has to learn about transgender issues for themselves, but I didn't want to have to be the educator for an entire community when I was still learning myself. I came out to some close friends while we were at a queer festival in Europe; on our return to the UK we were headed straight to the summer Earth First gathering. I didn't quite realise the undertaking I was making, deciding to come out to so many people at once during the gathering. I was in a field with friends from all over the country who I knew from different campaigns. It was such a shock from the queer bubble I had spent the past few weeks in, I hadn't really thought that telling everyone I was trans would be such an issue. I spent the whole week having to explain what being transgender was to people and being intensively questioned about it. People told me outrageous things, that they "wouldn't put up with my pronoun crap" and said things along the lines of "another one bites the dust" whilst referring to a "strong woman joining the other side"



I get sad and frustrated about the little to no cross-over between the queer scene and environmental direct action scene. They are the two most important things in my life and I can't have them at the same time.

I'm squatting in the city now and I'm happy to be surrounded by queer and trans people. I'm so deep inside a queer bubble that I can't imagine not being in it anymore. Some of the other forest queers followed me, in search of queer community too. But we're not happy or fulfilled with our lives, because we're not outside and we're not living in trees or fighting for what we believe in.

I look out from my window and see the trees sprouting their first buds of the spring. I wonder when I will be living in one of them again. And I wonder how I could still live in the forest and be having regular testosterone injections or recovering from surgery. I've been fighting the state for as long as I was old enough to have an opinion and I struggle with the idea of being dependent on it for hormone replacement therapy. My life has always been transient, and it doesn't seem like it could be that way whilst going through the process of medically transitioning.

For now I'm trying as hard as I can to be happy in the city. Making connections with other trans people, drinking and going to gigs; trying to re-live the teenage years I missed out on by living in a tree. I go for walks in the woods but it's not the same when my community isn't there. I run a zine distro that distributes zines about environmental direct action and protest sites. It's what I feel I can do whilst living in the city to support the fight I used to be a part of.

Spring 2011

I have fictionalised or obscured detail, characters and pronouns and generally edited out heartbreak. None of these omissions make the stories less true.

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I didn't expect to find queer community in the woods. Maybe we never called it that. Maybe Queer Community only exists in queerbachelorromance novels from San Francisco. Fuck it we had so much fun. We all fell hard for the land. We loved the trees and the little robins and the snowflakes falling through the legs of the tripods backlit by the full moon. But I think most of us fell in love with each other a few times too. We curled up together under 1000 donated sleeping bags and took turns reading aloud Ali Smith's 'Girl meets boy' queergenderfuckactivistromance.

We walked hand in hand over the clear-fell hill to watch the sleeping machines and feel rage hot in our veins. We climbed the highest tree where everything falls silent and felt so distant and alone, harness digging into tingling thighs fading to numbness. Slipped away from the flickering warmth into the cold night to be pushed against icy walls before everything was destroyed, your fingers finding their way through the winter layers to fuck me fast, my breath catching then escaping in clouds. Hot steam rose from your hand when you pulled away and we laughed and ran back along hard beech leaf frozen ground to friends and fire.



Some of the best nights we collapsed into bed alone dog tired from building defences or security guard tussles and slept so deeply only defrosting condensation diamonds falling on our faces woke us. Some of the best nights we held each other tight just to keep the cold away. Sometimes we'd fuck to keep the circulation flowing.

Back before the cold set in you laid me on the treehouse platform naked in the fat summer rain and watched the setting sun sparkle on raindrops splashing from huge green sycamore leaves onto my dripping wet cunt. That day we fucked like wide eyed animals growling and tumbling, scratching and biting and screaming and later as we lay face to face, waiting for our pounding hearts to slow I wondered what the first words would be when we remembered language till you said I love you.

Back before the heat faded you taught me how to climb by inviting me to sleep with you high, high, high up where your home swayed like a pirate ship and fear and desire and discovery shook the trembling poplar leaves.

Some nights we hardly slept at all, singing songs that told our stories, drawing diagrams of our next epic defence, disagreeing passionately about food, identity, politics, strategy, washing up. We taught and learnt and grew and lived and fought and fucked and sometimes it felt like our skin was too thin to hold all that love/rage in.

Gender and Protest

Something that never ceases to amaze me is the lack of awareness of gender issues within the radical ecological direct action movement in the UK. I have been in many situations on various protest sites & heard of plenty more where sexist, macho, queer and trans hateful behaviour has gone unquestioned (and is often even encouraged). Anarcha-feminism and gender politics are not out-dated or single issue. The word 'feminism' has such bad associations within some protest camps that the whole concept is often publicly mocked and derided.

When I first started living on a protest site I began to learn about how bad the ecological degradation of the planet has got but I learned nothing about gender issues and became of the opinion that feminists were uptight and not 'radical' enough. The atmosphere on sites sometimes is perfect for manifesting opinions like these, where macho behaviour can be seen as a 'norm' and more 'hard-core' acts of sabotage and rioting are often romanticised.

This culture of male dominated space where the boys' club can be accepted unquestioningly is not a safe, inclusive space like the ones that I want to be creating. Too often in so called "radical" spaces we are left having the same old tired ideological arguments about which dead white man wrote the best critique of the current system we live under. We need to be creating inclusivity now, not spending all of our time debating what an imagined future will look like.

Dismantling capitalism and/or civilisation will not dismantle patriarchy. This is something we should be constantly working on, checking our privileges, changing our learned behaviours and working in a way that facilitates the participation of people of all genders. More than dismantling patriarchy we should be looking to dismantle our concepts of gender roles and the way we have been taught to view gender itself. The

issues of transgender and gender queer people are almost completely overlooked by our movement (how many times have you been to a political event which has specifically gender neutral toilets?) and this needs to change.

Why do most of the transgender people and gender queer folks live in the city? Aside from the fact that some of us need to be closer to healthcare institutions for things like hormones and that it's very hard to recover from surgery on an active site, a lot of the same people are put off by the lack of awareness of queer issues. I've heard a lot of very privileged people say "The only real privilege is class privilege". That is bullshit. A class war revolution will not solve the many years of fucked up brainwashing that patriarchy has caused and will do nothing to further the recognition of people who live out-with the binary gender system every day of their lives. We have to create the inclusivity that people need or a lot of people aren't going to come to protest sites or take part in our communities at all.

In recent years work has been done to tackle this issue, with the rising popularity of much needed safer spaces agreements and general awareness of wider issues such as race, gender, and other forms of privilege and how they are all interlinked. There is still much work to be done however and it starts with all of us, now.

We need a radical discourse on these topics, we need spaces where all people who are motivated by the issues in the environmental movement feel safe to participate, we need to be strong enough to confront people when they act in ways that make those spaces unsafe and we need to be constantly working on ourselves and our communities to be as inclusive as possible. So let's educate ourselves on these issues and start creating safer, more accepting communities.

I don't know what the future holds for protest sites or queer communities, but I'd really like them to fall hopelessly in love with each other. So in a shameless attempt at matchmaking, I want two of the most awesome communities I've met to learn what they taught me: to love with passion, and to rage with integrity. And all other possible combinations of those four words.

